

*** TRANSCRIPT ***

[World peace, mastered by 4th-graders](#)

Podcast interview with John Hunter, acclaimed teacher and author of “World Peace and Other 4th-Grade Achievements;” and Janelle Kozyra, blogger for Post University

Janelle: Greetings everyone. I am Janelle Kozyra, a blogger for Post University. Today we have on the line with us John Hunter. And John is an acclaimed teacher and educational consultant. He is perhaps most famous for the creation of the World Peace Game, which he developed and has taught his 4th- and 5th- grade students for the past 35 years.

The game didn’t garner international attention, though, until a few years ago in 2010, when filmmaker Chris Farina discovered the game, and, fascinated by it, made the documentary entitled, “World Peace and other 4th-Grade Achievements.”

The film was seen by viewers around the world and led John to give a TED Talk in 2011. That has sparked many other major speaking engagements around the world, including at the Aspen Ideas festival, the Pentagon, and the United Nations.

And now the latest part in John’s journey is his new book, which he just released last week [April 2, 2013], which bears the same name as the documentary, “World Peace and other 4th-Grade Achievements.” So John, it’s a pleasure to have you with us. Thanks for joining us.

John: Thank you so much, Janelle. I’m thrilled to be here with you.

Janelle: So in your book, John, you talk about the World Peace Game, and there’s one line where you describe it as this. You say, “The children are provided with national budgets, assets, stores of armaments, and portfolios outlining 50 global crises. They are then given 10 weeks to save the world.” So tell us what the World Peace Game is in a little bit more detail.

John: Sure. The World Peace Game started in 1978, and it was a 4-foot-by-5-foot plywood piece of board on a classroom floor with hundreds of little toy soldiers and tanks and trucks and little building markers and city markers and so forth. It was a geopolitical simulation I designed for my 9th-grade students to solve the problems on the continent of Africa. That was what I was charged with teaching in 1978.

But I realized I had to build curriculum that was around and to the children’s actual love, what they really cared about. That always drives curriculum, I came to find. So board games was what they were excited about in 1978. We didn’t have Facebook or anything.

So we built it around a board game, and it’s evolved now into essentially a 4-foot-by-4-foot-by 4-foot Plexiglas tower. It’s four horizontal sheets of Plexiglas stacked one above the other. So you emulate the planet earth with under sea level, ground, aircraft level, and outer space level.

And the four countries plus the United Nations, World Bank, and arms dealers group of student are charged with saving the world by solving 50 interlocking global problems, simultaneously, and also raising every country’s asset value at the same time.

There's also Weather Goddess, who controls the random weather and random stock market, and a saboteur, a child who's charged with publically trying to save the game, but secretly trying to destroy the process, so it forces everybody to be more critical in their thinking.

Janelle: And you're primarily teaching this to 4th- and 5th-graders?

John: That's my school assignment. I have taught it in high school. I've actually taught adults in Norway using this exercise. But primarily I'm an elementary school teacher from a small town in Virginia, so that's where my skills lie, my hope skills lie anyway.

Janelle: And how has it been trying to get 4th-graders and these young elementary school students to understand such advanced international concepts?

John: Well that's a great question because I don't really have to teach it or to preach it. I simply develop an exercise that facilitates them taking power for their own learning. They actually give themselves homework because they're so excited with this fiction. They buy the fiction that the world is at stake and they must save it.

They become so immersed and so excited in this immersive exercise, that they simply have to know more and do better and learn more and learn faster and do it well. It's all experiential and the assessment—we call it self-evident assessment. You can see the results of their learning, and they can see it. So they have this empowerment to be in charge of their own learning.

I really don't have to do much except develop the exercise. Actually the hard part for me is not getting involved and to allow them to have it be their game. You know, I think I know what's right or what the right way to do things is because I have my own perspective and prejudices and biases and so forth. But what I have to learn to do is to listen quietly and to wait and be still and allow their collective wisdom and intelligence to work.

So they sort of just come on board full of fire and of course they're frightened at first. They don't know how to succeed. The game is designed to fail massively at first. I designed it that way deliberately. But coming through that, based on our relationship together, they're able to move into a higher state where they can then develop mastery and solving the world's problems, actually.

Janelle: From an educational perspective, what is your thinking behind using a game to teach skills like creativity, cooperation, problem solving, and others?

John: Well, you know, I think teachers, we have a feeling of by whatever means necessary, we find out who the children are, who the student is, and then the curriculum comes. In my case, we develop it after we know who we have in the room, rather than teaching some standard stock curriculum that they may or may not be in tune with.

Of course we have things we have to get across, but always I try to find out where the tie-in is with the required material and their personal passion, their personal interest, and to build a bridge between the two so that their interest drives the curriculum. It really does, and that makes it so much more exciting to have students engaged and thrilled about the work because they believe it's their work.

They believe they're doing what they want to do and that empowerment makes the learning go so much more deeply I think, and so much more sincerely for themselves. They feel that they are the teacher. In fact, I feel like I have a classroom full of co-teachers. I ask them at the beginning of every lesson, what shall we do? I say, we have this we must do. How shall we do it?

And they go to brainstorming like you wouldn't believe. And then I talk about what problems may arise if we decide to do it this way. How can we deal with the things that might come up that'll go wrong? And then we go after that. So they are deeply engaged before we even begin because they believe it's their own work that they're doing.

Janelle: Now what does this all boil down to? What is the ultimate goal you're trying to achieve through the World Peace Game?

John: That's a beautiful question, Janelle, really. I thought when I first started teaching, that my point, my purpose was to teach content. To teach some thinking skills. To show students how to manage and handle information. How to obtain information. But in the years since, the students have really taught me as I observe them.

But the real purpose in education, at least from my perspective of what they've shown me, is to develop a wonderful, compassionate human being. Somebody who really cares about others and can support and can take care of others and the planet.

So I hear them coming back from 15, 20, 30 years ago, saying, Mr. Hunter, the World Peace Game taught me how to be a better parent, a better friend, a better employer or employee, or a better soldier even. It taught me how to become a better person. All the knowledge in the world is nice to have, but if you're not a very kind or caring person, it's not as effective as it could be. So they taught me that the real purpose seems to be in becoming fully developed, caring, and compassionate human beings.

Janelle: Are there any students that stand out to you on what you were talking about just there, who have come back to you and told you, wow, this really stuck with me in this way and now I'm this sort of person because of it? Is there anyone that is sort of a shining star for you?

John: Oh yes, quite a few. And I have to say it's because of their own nature assuming this and making something of it. One student, I was giving a talk at a college and this old man at the back stood up and he was graying at the temples, a bit stooped, and he raised his hand and said, "Mr. Hunter, do you remember me?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well I was in your first World Peace Game class."

And I thought of course he looks like an old man to me—what does that make me? But he proceeded to talk to the group about his poignant experience in the World Peace Game and how it led him to be involved in educational policy in Washington, D.C., nationally. That was a very moving thing.

But what really struck me, what really moved me, was later we had a conversation, a Skype conversation. He told me, "Mr. Hunter, you know you did this gesture in class. It was about how to think conceptually. You just sort of twirled your hand around. It's kind of a funny thing. You were just doing it to make a joke, I think. But it really affected me so much that I took it to heart and it changed the way I thought about life, and made things possible for me in this policy position."

And then he said, “And I want to show you something.” He brought in this beautiful, young woman. It was his daughter. She was in her early 20s, I think, or just 21 or so, and she had gotten a job I think with the World Bank or something like that. “I taught her that gesture and that helped her get that job. And then I want you to see this.”

And he brought in a little child, maybe two, I don’t know, three. And he said, “I taught my grandson—this is her child—my grandson that gesture.” And it struck me that what you do as a teacher goes through generations. You’re not just teaching the child right in front of you. You’re teaching perhaps their children and grandchildren if the lesson is deep enough and sincere enough and real enough.

So that kind of effect, it’s humbling as a teacher to realize that even inadvertent gestures and words you may say may affect someone so deeply that it goes through decades of time. So you really have to be careful and be on your game as a teacher. And I do that. I try to be self-introspective, and remove my own limitations and inhibitions and prejudices and biases and get out of the way of their learning, if I can. And that’s a continual process, and something I have to engage in every time we play the World Peace Game.

Janelle: What is your most memorable teaching moment, teaching the World Peace Game?

John: Gosh. That’s a tough, tall order, but I’ll give it a shot. One I can think of, of course, and this relates to my mother, who was my 4th-grade teacher in segregated schools in the 60s in Virginia. I’ll be out of the classroom. Between game sessions, the kids had gone. And I’ll come back in after running an errand or checking on something in the office, and I’ll find two or three students have crept back in the room, and they don’t even see me come in. I come in very quietly behind them.

And they are staring into the game space. Into that giant 4-foot-by-4-foot-by 4-foot Plexiglas structure with hundreds of game pieces on every level. And they’re just staring. They’re walking around quietly and they’re stooping here to get a better look at something. They’re getting very close but being very careful. I realize they’re engaging this exercise, silently, quietly, reflectively.

They’re trying to almost merge with it in a spatial, tactical kind of way, this whole experience. And that for me is a beautiful moment when the learning calls to them. It asks them, and invites them to come back and revisit in a quiet moment and develop their own theories and understandings and ideas, and learning from this experience.

It reminds me of my mother, who always created a space for me and her other students, to allow us to come up with our best solution, our best ideas, our best selves, really, by not rushing to answer, tell us what was right and what was not right. She just simply gave a pause, sometimes a very long pause and allowed us to wrestle with the complications and develop our own understanding.

And that was such a beautiful reminder to have that experience happen. It happens occasionally, too, to have that reminder of my mother and to see real deep learning go on that I can’t even grade and assess, but yet you understand there’s learning taking place.

Janelle: In the way you have this game set up, it’s naturally set up so that some students might become territorial or combative towards each other. Have there ever been any situations where there was some kind of issue there, any sort of a conflicting situation with the students, and how did you manage that?

John: Yes, there have been many instances of that. The game is set up, of course, I designed it so that it does fail. Children learn in this process that failure or not achieving one's goals immediately is a part of life. It's normal. So there's no moral stigma for not getting it right. This game is so complex, there's no way to get it right, especially the first time out, but collectively they do over time.

So I have had students who repeatedly go against what I think is best, and because I've learned to be quiet and allow them to work through the consequences, to see for themselves what is best, that I think the learning has been enhanced that way.

There's an example of our two arms dealers, Michael and Jamal. They were happily trying to sell conventional weapons. I put that sort of dark aspect into the game of arms dealers and they weren't getting any takers. So they decided to go nuclear. They basically wanted to create dirty bombs. They'd done their research and asked the Weather Goddess how much money they had to spend to develop this technology and so forth.

So they decided to go into that field of business. I was disheartened. They can do that in the game. In the game, you can do anything you want if you can pay for it and deal with the consequences. And I was disheartened, but I couldn't say anything. That's their game. They have to do it their way. But I was disappointed.

They were about to sell their first nuclear weapon, when suddenly Michael had a revelation. He suddenly realized, and he said out loud, "If I sell you this weapon and you blow up other people, they're going to get mad and then they'll come and they're going to buy weapons and pretty soon everybody's going to get into a fight and everybody will be buying these weapons, and then pretty soon there won't be any customers left. We'll blow up everybody. Everyone will destroy each other."

And so he decided, "Jamal, we can't do this. We can't sell these weapons. We can still sell the regular weapons because they can recover from that." But they decided then to use their money to invest in developing more customers. They invested in a poor country's agriculture and farming and solar power, so they would have more customers to come later for their conventional weapons side.

Talk about the moral reasoning that had to go into that. How can I say that's right or wrong? It's an interesting situation they present. Forget grading it with an A, B, C, or D. How do you grade something that deep? And that amazingly complicated in thinking? So it's a beautiful thing to see that kind of situation happen where they're at odds with other people, but yet they find their way out.

Janelle: In your book, John, you talk about the seven stages of learning. Could you tell us what those are and why educators should be paying attention to them?

John: Well, it's not something I developed. It's just a natural process that I think probably most teachers are aware of and can see. It comes through observation. But in this particular exercise, students start off not knowing what to do. In fact, I pile on the complexity so much so that it's impossible they can know what to do, and they feel completely overwhelmed and overloaded.

And that overload that they feel is what I want to happen. I want that analytical mind that tries to tackle all problems and finish them off to be so completely overwhelmed that it simply gives up. And in that letting go, in that quiet moment when the mind collapses and can't do anything intellectually, it appears

that the other side of the brain, the right side, the intuitive side, maybe opens a bit. They're open to a whole new tool kit of solutions and possibilities and techniques.

Now they go through this overload stage and they're able to survive it because of our relationship together. The teacher has taken them in hand, and they know they can trust me. We trust each other and so they feel they can do it because I've said they can solve this. Somehow or another, they believe that's true. You simply say it and the children believe that you're correct.

So after we are in our lowest stages of despair, they try to solve a few problems and they fail. There's failure. There's no way it can be done easily. And of course, over time, they begin to make some inroads. They begin to have some success. But they find they don't do it alone. They find they do it by asking others to help them. Can you help me? I need some help. I can't do this alone.

They even say in the film, "World Peace and Other 4th-Grade Achievements," one student says, "We can't do this by ourselves." And it's a beautiful moment, because they've come into the stage of collaboration. They essentially discover collaboration. I don't have to teach it or preach it. It's uncovered by them and put to use as a tool by the students.

They go from that to I guess I would say a more of a hyper-collaboration stage. They start solving problems and seeing through consequences in multiple layers. It's not just one consequence, because all the crises are interlocked so you cannot simply think of a problem in isolation. Everything is interdependent, as it is in real life.

So they learn that they must go through this together in a collective way. They start to solve problems more quickly. And then there comes my favorite moment, I call it the "click," when suddenly someone, or perhaps the entire group, gets it all at once. They all seem to understand the entire equation of the game. All the complexities and trend lines and vectors all seem to become apparent to them.

They get so excited, there's an electricity in the room. They will stand suddenly, jump up and down, look at each other with eyes wide with excitement, they see and they understand what is really going on. They're not playing against each other, as Mr. Hunter posited in their Crisis Description. They're playing against the game, together.

At that point, they enter a stage that I think the author Csikszentmihalyi wrote in the book "Flow" a couple decades ago, a "state of flow." They enter this sort of timeless place, where they can do now wrong. They are on their game. Ideas and creativity seem to flow like water and they realize they're in it and they're in a stage of mastery.

And they understand that they are and the joy, the ecstasy they feel, the ecstasy they feel in solving problems and being creative, unfettered, and able to discover and use new tools and applications so rapidly, that is just an amazing moment for a teacher.

So with that in hand they go on to mastering. They're able to then apply these things in the game and win the game handily. But then they also kind of apply these tools, these lessons, these understandings in life and they go on to do astounding things.

And they report back to me. "Mr. Hunter, because of the game, I organized a charity, and I got \$100 together. This is the, I think, semester right after the game, we got \$100 together and we sent it to

Mozambique to build a well in a village because people were dying of not having enough water. I had the same problem in the World Peace Game of impure drinking water, and we had to solve that somehow.” So these kind of things carry over into life, immediately and in a real way that again, I don’t have to teach or preach. The students are in charge of learning it themselves.

Janelle: How has your experience teaching the World Peace Game shaped your perspective on whether we really can achieve world peace?

John: Can we achieve world peace? Well, you know, I have no idea. I’d like to think so. I’m optimistic and hopeful. But what I’ve seen from my students—this gives me the most hope—because over 35 years, every team under impossible situations with conflicting, complex situations has always found a unique way of solving all these interlocking problems, 50 global problems, with more rising every term, and somehow come to peace, and have decided every time, that compassion is the thing we really need to strive for.

We need to take care of everyone. Everyone has to succeed if the game is to be won. And that is the beautiful thing that comes about in every game for me and inspires me. And so I realize that every child who plays the game is sort of a chance, sort of a microcosm of opportunity. Every child who plays the game is a chance for greatness, for something good to happen.

So I realize we can’t write off any child, can’t give up on anybody, can’t let anybody go by the wayside. Everybody is vitally important. We never know who’s the person we’re going to need. We never know who that is, so we’ve got to include everyone. So that kind of activity, that kind of behavior that they express, every time they play it over three decades, just inspires me over the moon.

I’m really hopeful and I see what they’ve done as they’ve gone on, decades later, as adults. And that’s doubly inspiring, because they continue that good attitude and that good work, and I’m just so thrilled to be a part of it, really.

Janelle: It sounds wonderful, John, and it was a pleasure speaking with you today. We really appreciate you taking time out with us.

John: Oh Janelle, it’s my pleasure. You know I’m a small-town schoolteacher. Just to have somebody in your organization, your stature, consider what we’re doing worthy and consider what the kids are doing so important, you know that’s really a great, great feeling for any teacher to have. Thank you for that.

Janelle: Thank you. And for all of our listeners out there, if what we talked about right now intrigues you, feel free to pick up a copy of John’s book, “World Peace and Other 4th-Achievements.” Thank you so much, John.

John: Thank you, Janelle. Thank you all.

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